Ron's B-17 Ride

Photo by EAA

When a kid is absolutely nuts about airplanes, feeding him a rip-roaring TV show featuring steely-eyed pilots, flaming machine guns, and roaring warbirds is like feeding him him Jolt cola with an espresso chaser….intravenously.

"Twelve O'Clock High," starring Robert Lansing, came out when I was nine years old. I went absolutely ga-ga. I was glued to the set for every episode, manning every gun position, pickling the bombs, and flying the shot-to-pieces "Picadilly Lily" back to Archbury time after time.

Interest faded, of course after the show was canceled…after all, this was the '60s, and the ability to record a TV show at home for later playback was a decade or so in the future.

I was left mostly with fond memories, and a nagging affection for the REAL star of the show: The Boeing B-17.

I never would have guessed that forty-five years later I would get to ride in one….

The Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) acquired their B-17 in the 1980s. After ten years of display and restoration, they started touring the country. Not content with merely getting it flying again, they've been working hard to make everything as original as possible.

When you consider that many of the specialized parts haven't been manufactured for more than sixty years, this is a pretty tall order. Just in the last year, they got the ball turret (belly turret) operational.

It took a considerable amount of work, but EAA finally got FAA permission to sell rides in the B-17. So "Aluminum Overcast" travels the country every year, basically "barnstorming" with a four-engined warbird.

I knew about it. I considered buying a ride. But the trips are pretty expensive, and there are always other things to spend the money on. Yes, I *could* afford the $400 or so the rides cost. I'm just, well…too cheap. I have a hard time spending money on momentary pleasures like this.

But in early 2010, I did a bit of data analysis and writing for EAA, outside my usual contributions to the magazines. EAA asked me how much they should compensate me for the work I did.

Inspiration struck: "How about a B-17 ride, instead?"

So… on May 29th, I got a half-hour ride in EAA's B-17. The following pages are the pictures I took, along with some of my impressions.

Photo by EAA

The day was cold and a bit rainy, early on. I arrived about an hour before my flight, but they hadn't even started flying yet due to a low ceiling. I overheard the EAA crew (who come from Oshkosh) complaining about the weather…I suspect they don't often encounter Memorial Day weekends with temperatures in the low 50s.

The people waiting for rides didn't complain about the cold. For some reason, most of us were wearing leather flying jackets.

Imagine that.

One of the things you might not realize is the logistical "tail" required to fly a B-17 all across the country. The Fortress has four seventy-year-old radial engines…they require special tools, and a stock of replacement parts that you just won't find at the local aviation store. The plane just isn't large enough to carry everything.

So "Aluminum Overcast" is followed by a pair of trailers, towed by a couple of Ford trucks. One trailer is a combination office and gift shop, the other is a mobile workshop. Note the replacement wheel on the far wall…

"Aluminum Overcast" is basically barnstorming. They take ten people per flight (plus three crew), and schedule a flight every 45 minutes. The plane taxis in, they turn it around, then the right-side engines are shut down while the previous passengers deplane and the newcomers board.

At Boeing Field on my flight day, the wind was about 20 knots from the south. It would have added ten minutes or so to every flight for the plane to taxi to the north end of the airport from the museum, so they made every takeoff downwind!

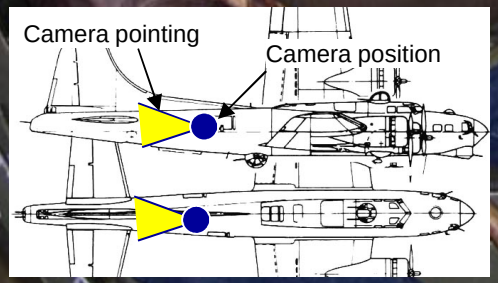
Watching "Twelve-O'Clock high every week, I always saw the pilots get onto the plane by performing a pull-up through a hatch in the belly just forward of the wing. I always wondered if I'd be able to even get IN a B-17.

Of course, there was crew door in back that they seldom showed. That's how we got aboard "Aluminum Overcast." Note the CAP cadets helping provide security

The crew door, as you can probably tell, it NOT a big airliner door. It's really no more than a biggish hatch. My nine-year old self would have had no problem, but this stiff-kneed fat old man had to wiggle a bit…

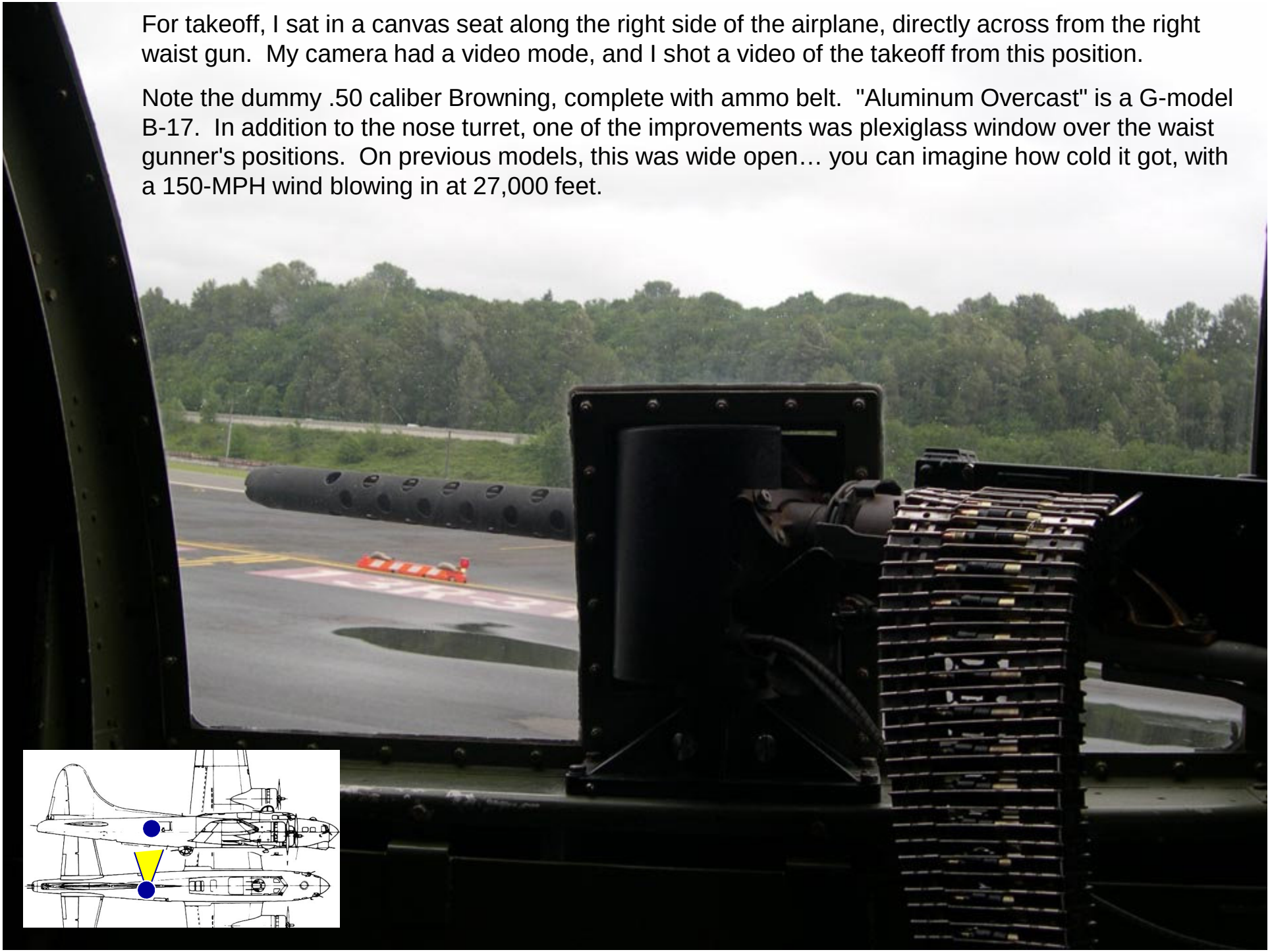
The EAA had to jump through a lot of FAA hoops to get permission to sell flights in an aircraft certified in the Limited category. One was the installation of approved seats for the occupants…the original seats didn't meet current requirements. A set of seats were installed in the Radio Operator's compartment, but the waist has canvas benches similar to the troop seats in military transports. The rear bench seat blocked off access to the tail gunner position.

The crew hatch is just to the left of the gentleman on the left.



For takeoff, I sat in a canvas seat along the right side of the airplane, directly across from the right waist gun. My camera had a video mode, and I shot a video of the takeoff from this position.

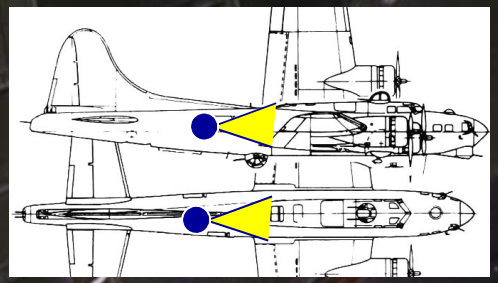
Note the dummy .50 caliber Browning, complete with ammo belt. "Aluminum Overcast" is a G-model B-17. In addition to the nose turret, one of the improvements was plexiglass window over the waist gunner's positions. On previous models, this was wide open… you can imagine how cold it got, with a 150-MPH wind blowing in at 27,000 feet.



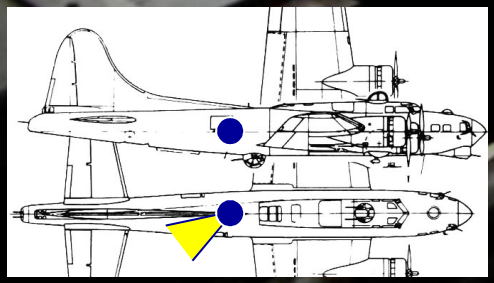
This is the support structure for the ball turret in the belly. The yellow tank is the oxygen bottle for the gunner. It was a lot easier, mechanically, to have a separate tank rotate with the turret than to design the appropriate slip joints from the main oxygen supply.

Note the left waist gun. Another improvement on the G-model was to stagger the waist gun positions to keep the gunners from bumping into each other.

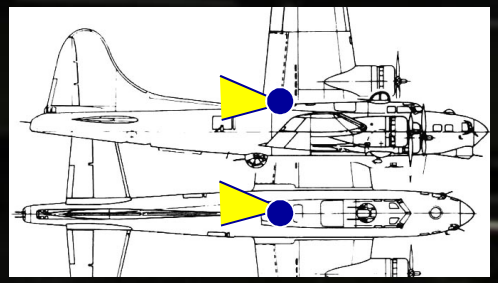
The open door beyond the oxygen bottle leads to the radio room



A view of Safeco Field and the Port of Seattle out of the right-side waist gunner position

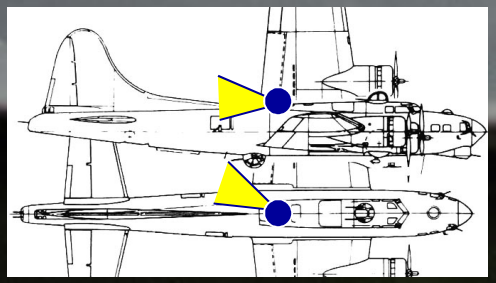


As I pilot, I'm supposed to prefer the cockpit, or the incredible view from the nose. I found myself really liking the Radio Room. From my modelling days, I thought the only view was straight up through the plexiglass window. In reality, you can stand right up to it and get an outstanding view behind the aircraft. It's the brightest, airiest, best view in the house (ok…SECOND best view)



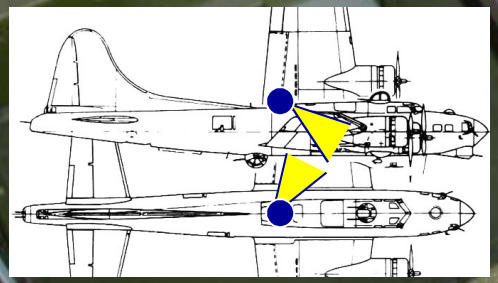
Another shot from the radio compartment.

The B-17 was a big airplane in 1945, but it's pretty small, today. You're crouching, most of the time. With the strong wind, our flight was a bit rough, and you were pretty much just a pinball bouncing between the sides. The radio compartment was one of the few places where I could stand up all the way without concerns about bonking into stuff attached to the sides and ceiling.

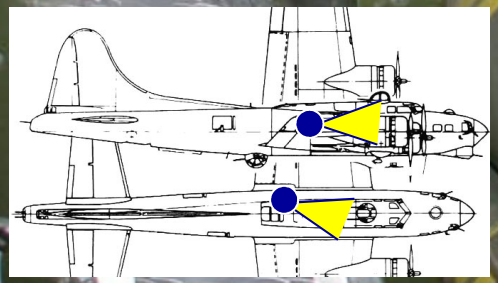


The radio room, showing the vintage equipment (and a non-vintage purse).

I cadged this seat for the landing. The window is small, and mostly views the top of the wing.

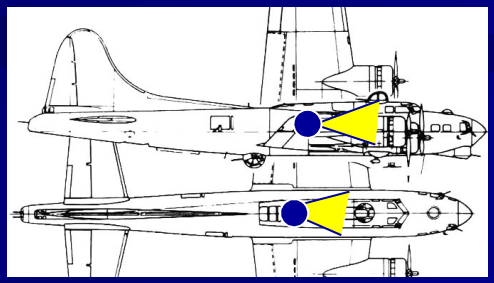


The business end. The B-17's job was to carry up to four tons of bombs.
The bomb bay really isn't very big…but bombs are heavy and dense.



Another view of the bomb bay, showing the catwalk between the cockpit and the aft part of the airplane. You can see the door to the radio room on the left.

The structure in the middle was a pretty tight fit for a fat middle-aged man wearing a leather jacket. It would have been much easier for the young men flying these planes in the war. However, they would have been wearing bulky flying gear to keep them warm at 30,000 feet…and wearing a portable oxygen bottle.



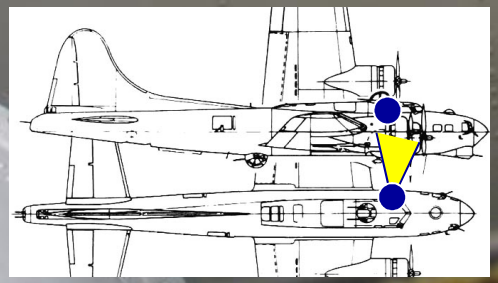
The flight deck. The FAA won't let us passengers sit in the pilot seats, so I didn't get to fly it.

The panel is a mix of old and new. Note the panel-mounted moving map display, as well as the portable hung from the ceiling

Why, yes, I WAS there.

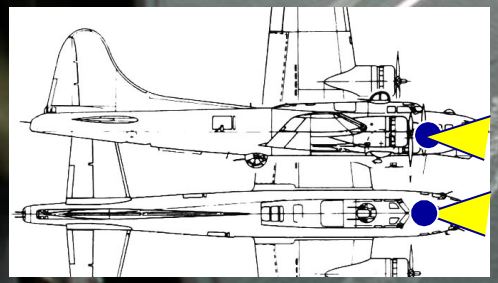
The Crew Chief took this photo for me, and he is actually standing where the top turret mechanism normally goes. Only the plexiglass "cap" is in place. I suspect this is to give some extra room on the flight deck.

A few thousand horsepower, just outside the window. While the plane is natural silver, the inner portions of the nacelles are painted to reduce glare



Another tight fit… the crawlway from the cockpit into the nose. The floor of the cockpit is right about at the top of the door. You go down the short ladder in back, then hunker down and crawl forward. Note the hatch on the lower right…this is the one I remember from the TV show.

The million dollar view. Since there were ten passengers and a 30-minute flight, we were only allowed two minutes up front. The nose was full of restored gear…but my camera only had eyes for the view out the front



View of the engines from the nose compartment. And, yes, we all wore hearing protection throughout the flight.

The Norden Bombsight

During the war, the sights were required to be under guard at all times.

Bombardiers took an oath during their training stating that they would protect the sight with their own life, if necessary. If the plane crash-landed behind enemy lines, they were to shoot key portions of the site with a .45 pistol and activate a thermal device.

The last combat use of the Norden bombsite was during the Vietnam War!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